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WASHINGTON AND ENTANGLING ALLIANCES

BY ROLAND G. USHER

PRECISELY what had Washington in mind when he incorporated in his Farewell Address the famous dictum about "entangling alliances"? Can we prove that he meant what he has been understood to mean? What circumstances led him to this conclusion; how permanent did he believe this isolation should be; how considerable a modifying influence did he assign to future exigencies? It can hardly be gainsaid that definite answers to these questions would go far to settle the doubts in the minds of many Americans concerning future foreign policy, for many feel it safer to follow what they believe to have been the counsel of Washington than to form foreign alliances in an attempt to solve present American problems.

Fortunately, the very full evidence enables us to answer definitely all questions about the Farewell Address that are of significance. Like most important State papers, it was not composed entirely by Washington but was evolved with the assistance and collaboration of Hamilton and Madison, both of whom drafted it in full. After much discussion and correspondence with them and with others, Hamilton's final draft, with many alterations and excisions by Washington himself, was utilized. So full is our information about Hamilton's thoughts and about Washington's own ideas that we can almost trace the Address in the correspondence of the two men for the preceding years.

Washington himself has left us no doubt as to the primary purpose of this document. He says explicitly in a letter written at the moment of publication: "the principal design of it is to remove doubts at the next election" as to his candidacy for the office of President. In 1796, as his advanced

age began to enfeeble his health, and the desires always strong in him for a quiet country life became more and more insistent, he felt that he could not accept a third term as President. He had, however, been so abused and vilified in the public press for several years, his character so aspersed, his motives so invariably questioned and misunderstood, that his modest and retiring nature shrank from announcing that he would not be a candidate for fear that his enemies would promptly impute to him vanity and conceit. In those days the Presidential electors were supposed to ballot in secret for candidates who had not previously announced to the people their willingness to accept election, and Washington rightly felt that, in declaring he sought no further political office, he would lay himself open to the charge of coveting what others had no intention of offering him. Such scruples seem to us, at this distance, strained and unnatural in his case, but the importance which Washington attached to them is evinced not only in his correspondence with Madison in 1792, but in the letters to Hamilton and others in the months when the Address itself was in preparation. As an expedient, he hit upon the idea of a "valedictory address," which, apparently occasioned by more general and permanent considerations, would thus make the statement of his unwillingness to become a Presidential candidate incidental to larger issues.

A second motive which played a great part in his decision was the desire to answer in some dignified and impressive manner the extraordinary campaign of vituperation which had been directed against him and his policy. For us who have been accustomed to think of the Farewell Address as delivered to a patriotic and affectionate nation, eager to receive from its most honored and revered statesman his parting words of counsel, it is a shock to learn that Washington meant it to be his justification before posterity for a policy which had been as roundly abused and more generally disapproved by contemporaries than perhaps any other ever initiated by an American statesman. Here again his own innate modesty made him hesitate to defend himself openly for fear he should reveal the depth of the wounds such hostility had caused him, and for fear lest his enemies should exult over an admission that he felt defense necessary. As he wrote Hamilton, the Address must defend him and his policy without making either him or his policy too prominent. Joined to these motives was the hope in Washington's mind

that he might still possess sufficient influence—which he seems at this time to have doubted—to restrain the people from an alliance with France which he believed imminent and both unwise and inexpedient.

In the last paragraphs of the Address itself, Washington has struck for us its keynote: “With me, a predominant motive has been to gain time to [sic] our country to settle and mature its yet recent institutions and to progress without interruption to that degree of strength and consistency which is necessary to give it, humanly speaking, the command of its own fortunes.”

Throughout the years of his Presidency the fact which had been borne in upon him by events had been the weak and defenseless condition of the country. An aggregation of struggling people organized into States, deeply jealous of each other, loaded with foreign and domestic debt, with a credit scarcely established, and with neither army or navy, it seemed to him that our greatest problems were domestic, and our greatest necessity, sufficient time to solve them. He was afraid that the Constitution might not work, that the strong anti-Federalist party, hostile to it, might gain the upper hand and abolish it. A leader the malcontents had found in Thomas Jefferson, and active expression of their policies had appeared in the various newspapers which Jefferson subsidized. In Virginia and in the Mississippi Valley Washington knew an anti-national movement was being nourished by the men in his own councils. The Whiskey Rebellion against the authority of the Federal Government had, to be sure, been crushed, but the probability of other resistance was great.

And this country, weak, disorganized, and divided within itself, was, he saw, entirely dependent for its prosperity upon its foreign commerce. It produced what it could not consume and what it must sell either in the West Indies or in Europe. It had been accustomed to buy in Europe, chiefly in England, most of those commodities necessary to a civilized existence. By the sale of their own produce in the West Indies, American merchants had bought sugar and molasses which they carried to England and exchanged for manufactured goods needed in America. The dependence of the new Government and its people upon Europe was dire. What we raised could be sold only to European nations or to their colonies. What it was almost imperative for us to buy had to be obtained

from them. Just at this time, too, an extremely lucrative trade with France had sprung up in American grain, the first truly American product, except tobacco, to find sale in any quantity in Europe.

In the way of this exchange, upon which the prosperity of the whole country was seen directly to depend, stood Great Britain; English manufactured goods were those most desired; the British West Indian colonies furnished the best markets for American produce. Yet the recent Revolution and the events of the subsequent years had thoroughly embittered English statesmen and led them to maintain restrictions exceedingly onerous to their former colonists. That the British statesmen had much reason for their distrust Washington was forced to admit. The Treaty of 1783 had not been executed by the Americans; the Loyalists had been maltreated and their property confiscated, despite the promises in the Treaty; nearly all the private and public debts owed by Americans in England had been repudiated during or after the war; and there was genuine doubt abroad whether the new Government under the Constitution was likely to maintain its credit and observe its promises any better than had the States and the Confederation.

Yet to the harassed President it was clear that without a navy we could not coerce Great Britain's fleet; that such access as we had to the West Indies and to Europe in general we must obtain with her consent. As Hamilton wrote to Washington in 1794: " 'Tis our error to overrate ourselves and underrate Great Britain; we forget how little we can annoy; how much we may be annoyed." Washington therefore concluded that the United States must preserve peace at all costs and was urged thereto "by motives of policy, interest, and every other consideration, that ought to actuate a people situated and circumstanced as we are, already deeply in debt, and in a convalescent state from the struggle we had been engaged in ourselves."

This period of probation, when America's weakness thrust upon her a policy of circumspection and political isolation, was estimated by Washington and Hamilton at not less than twelve nor probably more than twenty years. In the Farewell Address Washington thus phrased this notion: "The period is not far off when we may defy material injury from external annoyance . . . when we may choose peace or war as our interests guided by justice shall counsel."

Shortly before he had written: "If this country is preserved in tranquillity twenty years longer, it may bid defiance in a just cause to any Power whatever; such in that time will be its population, wealth, and resources."

The idea of no entangling alliances seems to have originated in negative conclusions. It was not that Washington felt that no alliance could be beneficial. The strength of the British sea power and the probable continuance of its supremacy, the extent of American dependence upon Europe, made cordial relations with Great Britain essential, and an alliance with that country was therefore *prima facie* expedient and desirable. The closer our contact (always assuming that we retained our political independence) the more advantageous the relation would be for both countries. But he saw that this alliance was one which the state of the public mind both in England and in the United States made impossible; the Revolution almost prevented the conclusion of any favorable understanding between the Governments.

At the same time, both he and Hamilton felt—and their idea descended as a tradition—that England's own interests would compel her in the long run to sanction practically that extent of intercourse with Europe and the British dominions which was imperative for America. Nor were they blind to the fact that England's own interests were a better foundation for American privileges than any paper alliance. To develop more cordial relations, to make possible for Great Britain concessions without loss of self-respect, to facilitate, where possible by diplomatic methods, arrangements and concessions: such must be the policy of the United States. A reconquest by England Washington scouted, not only as impossible of success, but as a move which the British themselves would not attempt. The one European Power which could reach America, which in fact held America in her hands, he believed was already convinced that conquest was unwise. Eminently desirable for the rapid promotion of American commerce, an alliance with Great Britain's sea power was fortunately neither imperative for defense nor essential to ensure the continuance of that minimum of economic privilege upon which the prosperity of the country depended. In her own interests Great Britain must perforce concede in practice that minimum which we could not dispense with, and in time the growth of the United States

might make possible the exaction of more, or an alteration of sentiment in both countries might result in an amicable adjustment.

But at all costs, Washington felt, the United States must not further antagonize the sea power and thus risk the loss of that minimum of privilege. Under the stress of war or urged by resentment and passion, Great Britain might rescind that, and from its loss calamity must ensue. A commercial crisis at that precise juncture Washington felt would overturn the Constitution and put into an overwhelming majority the anti-national forces, already hostile to his own policies and the great measures of Hamilton for the funding of the debt and the establishment of the public credit at home and abroad. Yet such an alliance the great majority of the American people, led by Jefferson, seemed firmly determined to make. France, who had aided us during the Revolution and with whom we had signed a defensive treaty, was now at war in Europe with Great Britain, Austria, and the majority of the smaller states. For America, demonstrations in favor of France were common; Jefferson and his partisans declared that the existing treaty and the honor of the nation alike counseled assistance to those who had before helped us. So great was the popular enthusiasm and so vigorous were the expressions of hostility to Great Britain, so determined were the attempts to force Washington's hand and compel an alliance with France or a war with England, that the President was hard pressed to resist.

Both he and Hamilton felt, however, that to ally with France was suicide. The prosperity of the United States depended upon an access to the West Indies and to Europe which the British fleet could interdict completely. The consequences of a restriction of privilege had already demonstrated how terrible would be the result of its complete loss. Alliance with England was out of the question, but favorable commercial terms and at least a certain tolerance were essential. Nor did there seem to be a remote possibility of assisting France while the British fleet ruled the sea. Hamilton even contended that France had aided us during the Revolution solely to advance her own interests, and that we therefore owed her no debt of gratitude. In the end, Washington issued a proclamation of neutrality; snubbed Genêt and replied in friendly but reserved tone to the fervid letters from Paris; and sent Jay to England to negotiate as favorable and

extensive a commercial treaty as could be had. The President was not optimistic as to the extent of privilege likely to be achieved, but felt with Hamilton that under the circumstances the United States must be satisfied with what could be had, and hoped that a change of conditions and perhaps of public feeling in both countries would in the future make the extension of commercial privileges possible. As he wrote to Lee, the proclamation of neutrality was intended to restrain, "as far as a proclamation would do it, our citizens from taking part in the contest."

In the Farewell Address he attempted to defend this policy by means of general propositions of advice which were really intended to convey to the men of the time some such ideas as these. Beware of alienating unnecessarily the sea power upon which you are dependent. Do not, under present circumstances, think of an alliance with France which must be based upon theory and sentiment rather than upon mutual interest. Beware of all foreign alliances which pledge the country to more assistance than it is capable of rendering or expose it to dangers which it has no means of resisting. Remember that time must elapse before the United States can become strong enough to take its place in the world and develop an independent foreign policy suited to its needs and its prospects. Until then beware of all entanglements, and even then beware of permanent alliances which the very growth of the country may itself render inexpedient in a few years. Like a weak country, a rapidly growing country must frequently revise its policies in accordance with the exigencies of times and occasions. For years to come temporary alliances will serve even extraordinary emergencies.

The following sentences include those portions of the Farewell Address which are significant in this connection, and they seem to bear, without straining or unnecessary twisting the interpretation just sketched:

Nothing is more essential, than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular Nations [Great Britain] and passionate attachments for others [France] should be excluded; and that, in place of them, just and amicable feelings towards all should be cultivated. . . . Sympathy for the favorite Nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest, in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation in the quarrels and wars of the latter, without adequate inducement or justification.

. . . And it gives to ambitious, corrupted, or deluded citizens (who devote themselves to the favorite nation) [the Anti-Federalists] facility to betray or sacrifice the interests of their own country, without odium, sometimes even with popularity. . . . Such an attachment of a small or weak, towards a great and powerful nation, dooms the former to be the satellite of the latter. . . . Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence (I conjure you to believe me, fellow-citizens), the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake. . . . Real patriots [Federalists] who may resist the intrigues of the favorite [France] are liable to become suspected and odious; while its tools and dupes [Jefferson et al.] usurp the applause and confidences of the people, to surrender their interests. . . .

The great rule of conduct for us, in regard, to foreign nations, is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little *political* connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop. Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none, or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves, *by artificial ties*, in the *ordinary* vicissitudes of her politics, or the *ordinary* combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities. Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course. If we remain one people, under an efficient government, the period is not far off, when we may defy material injury from external annoyance; when we may take such an attitude as will cause the neutrality we may at any time resolve upon, to be scrupulously respected; when belligerent nations, under the impossibility of making acquisitions upon us, will not lightly hazard the giving us provocation; when we may choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel. . . . It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portions of the foreign world; so far, I mean as we are now at liberty to do it. . . . Taking care always to keep ourselves, by suitable establishments, on a respectable defensive posture, we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies. . . . Harmony, liberal intercourse with all nations, are recommended by policy, humanity, and interest.

From the earlier portions of the Address comes corroboration of this view that the document was primarily intended as a defense of Washington's policies and opinions rather than as a permanent statement of future policy. At the same time, everyone who reads that remarkable paper must be struck by the prescience displayed by Washington in formulating his original policy upon those subjects per-

manently significant and vital to the welfare of the American people. Whatever his intentions may have been, he certainly mentioned no subject of purely transient interest and did group those permanent features of policy which the development of the country was to affirm. The necessity of union, the dangers of sectionalism, the importance of a prompt obedience to the Federal Government, the dangers of factional conflict between political parties, the encroachment of the various departments of the Government upon each other, the imperative necessity of the maintenance of public credit,—such advice was the result of particular events and controversies upon which he himself had taken the unpopular side; but later events demonstrated the far-seeing wisdom of his choice and the accuracy of his analysis of conditions. The Farewell Address did not itself create a policy for the country: it formulated definitively those policies which Washington had already decided were expedient so long as the country's economic weakness remained pronounced, so long as the European situation made any alliance suicidal except that with the sea power, and while the Revolution made impossible and undesirable any close political connection with the late mother-country.

The Address, however, stresses with persistence three points. The situation which made such policies expedient Washington believed would disappear within twenty years, and then a more definite, more permanent, and less negative policy might be formulated. He further gave personal directions to the printer that the word "political" was to be italicized in the phrases concerning relations with Europe. The distinction he wished to draw was between political and economic relations, the former of which he felt should be as slight as possible with all nations, including Great Britain, and the latter of which he was clear should be as extended as possible with all nations and in particular with Great Britain. Finally, he constantly distinguished between permanent political alliances, which he believed inexpedient for the United States because we had no interest in the "ordinary" friendships or enmities in Europe, and temporary political alliances which he felt would be under extraordinary emergencies essential. His warning against European alliances emphasized again and again all engagements which were not rooted in American interests, adding that until the country had attained greater development Amer-

ica could have no political (not economic) interests which a European alliance would be necessary to defend.

It should, therefore, be clear that Washington himself explicitly implied in the Farewell Address that the growth of the country would probably invalidate his counsel regarding entangling alliances within twenty years. Would he not be the last to hold that the American people are to-day to feel themselves bound to follow under present conditions a counsel regarding alliances explicitly based upon the fundamental problems of a small, weak, disorganized, debt-ridden country in which firm constitutional government, the public credit, and nationality, had yet to be established beyond the possibility of change?

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